DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 860 CS 506 508

AUTHOR	Jensen, Marvin D.
TITLE	Increasing Cultural Literacy in the Basic Speech Communication Course.
PUB DATE	89
NOTE	8p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Class Activities; *Curriculum Enrichment; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; *Speech Communication; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Cultural Literacy; *Speech Communication Education

ABSTRACT

Access to the traditions, aspirations, and rewards of a culture implies a fundamental knowledge of the symbols, images, archetypes, places, and events which comprise a cultural heritage. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. contends that there has been a marked decline in this "cultural literacy" in recent years due in part to neglect at all levels of education. The basic speech communication course is one appropriate place to foster cultural literacy. Short informative speeches and the attendant search for topics provide opportunities to develop assignments with cultural literacy in mind. For example, for an interesting short speaking assignment, each student can draw five terms from Hirsch's collection of concepts, names, dates, events, places, and phrases which he believes every literate American should know, and prepare an extemporaneous speech which incorporates all five concepts. A more complicated assignment later in the course could be a serial speech, in which each speaker pursues an allusion made by an earlier speaker. Depending on the structure and components of the course, other assignments encouraging cultural literacy can be incorporated. Panel discussions, persuasive speaking assignments, and role-playing interviews can all be used to increase cultural literacy. (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED302860

INCREASING CULTURAL LITERACY IN THE BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION COURSE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Marvin Jensen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Marvin D. Jensen
Assistant Professor of Communication Studies
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA 50614

CS506508

INCREASING CULTURAL LITERACY IN
THE BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION COURSE

Some years ago, while traveling in Poland, the historian Max Lerner was asked by his hosts to summarize American civilization in one word. After considering and rejecting "freedom," "justice," "equality," and "democracy," he finally said "access."[1] Lerner believed that the essential promise offered by American culture is the opportunity for advancement and self-improvement. But access to the traditions, aspirations, and rewards of a culture implies a fundamental knowledge of the symbols, images, archetypes, places and events which comprise a heritage. E. D. Hirsch, Jr. calls this knowledge cultural literacy and notes that until recently such literacy could be assumed even among minorities oppressed by American culture or protesters actively involved in a counter-culture.[2] Thus, Martin Luther King's allusions to the Gettysburg Address, The Bible, and the Confederate Memorial at Stone Mountain in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech were understood; and the linguistic parallels to the Declaration of Independence in the 1972 Black Panther Party platform needed no explanation.

However, Hirsch contends that there has been a marked decline in cultural literacy in recent years due in part to neglect at all levels of education. Indications of this neglect are readily observable and frequently reported. Recent studies show widespread ignorance of geography, including basic misconceptions of direction and size. People approached on city streets have failed to recognize the Declaration of Independence and the majority have refused to endorse such a "radical" document. Campaign

speeches in 1988 were reduced to the lowest levels of triteness, apparently on the assumption that voters would not understand nuances or subtleties. College students reading Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? usually have never heard of Virginia Woolf, miss the allusion to Faust in the second act because they are unaware of Goethe, and are mystified by the Latin in the last act--which most cannot identify as a language, much less associate with a Catholic funeral liturgy. Similar examples are often reported in the press and are known to every college teacher.

Hirsch attributes the cause of cultural illiteracy in part to "the fragmented curriculum" in which language arts are taught as skills without exploring a body of culturally significant information.[3] This fragmented curriculum may continue into college-level coursework unless deliberate steps are taken to incorporate such information.

The basic course in speech communication is one appropriate place in which cultural literacy can be fostered. The frequent requirement of short informative speeches and the attendant search for topics provide opportunities to develop assignments with cultural literacy in mind.

Hirsch has offered 53 pages of concepts, names, dates, events, places, and phrases which he believes every literate American should know.[4] An interesting short speaking assignment can be developed by asking each student to draw five of these terms from a random mix and prepare an extemporaneous speech which incorporates all five concepts. Such an assignment requires basic research and presents an organizational challenge--and the speaker may find that the "game" aspect of the assignment reduces the anxiety that often accompanies early speeches.

A more complicated and challenging assignment later in the course could be a serial speech, in which each speaker pursues an allusion made by an earlier speaker. This assignment can be introduced by reflecting on a passage from Helene Hanff's The Duchess of Bloomsbury Street, in which she explains her own introduction to "cultural literacy." She once found a book of lectures on the art of writing by Arthur Quiller-Couch and undertook to educate herself. But she soon realized that her task was larger than she anticipated:

> Q was lecturing to young men educated at Eton and Harrow. He therefore assumed that his students--including me--had read Paradise Lost as a matter of course and would understand his analysis of the 'Invocation to Light' in Book 9. So I said, 'Wait here,' and went down to the library and got Paradise Lost and took it home and started reading it and got to page 3, when I hit a snag:
>
> Milton assumed I'd read the Christian version of Isaiah and the New Testament and had learned all about Lucifer and the War in Heaven, and since I'd been reared in Judaism I hadn't. So I said, 'Wait here,' and borrowed a Christian Bible and read about Lucifer and so forth, and then went back to Milton and read Paradise Lost, and then finally got back to Q, page 3. On page 4 or 5, I discovered that the point of the sentence at the top of the page was in Latin and the long quotation at the bottom of the page was in Greek. So I advertised in the Saturday Review for somebody to teach me Latin and Greek, and

> went back to Q meanwhile, and discovered he assumed I not only knew all the plays of Shakespeare, and Boswell's Johnson, but also the Second Book of Esdras, which is not in the Old Testament and not in the New Testament, it's in the Apocrypha, which is a set of books nobody had ever thought to tell me existed.[5]

While the student in the basic course does not have the time to follow as many levels of inquiry as Hanff pursued, the process can be similar and the result is increased cultural literacy. A speech of some complexity (serving also as a model of numerous elements of good speaking) can be presented on videotape, and each of several students assigned to prepare an informative speech on a concept introduced in the model speech. By working with each student, an instructor can introduce one or more additional concepts into each student's speech which can then be explored through informative speeches by another level of speakers. The web of exploration can be spun out until all students have spoken, or the process can be restarted with a new model speech (perhaps introducing other elements of effective speaking). In addition to encouraging cultural literacy, this assignment promotes careful listening, group cohesiveness, and research experience.

Depending on the structure and components of the basic course, other assignments encouraging cultural literacy can also be incorporated. Panel discussions can be framed around policy or value questions such as: what should be done to increase the cultural literacy of college students, or what is the proper emphasis on cultural literacy in a university curriculum? Persuasive speaking assignments can be made in which students address issues of importance in 18th century America, 1st century Rome, ancient Athens,

or any other historical period. Role-playing interviews can be done in which a historical figure or contemporary scientist, statesman, or philosopher is interviewed. Analyses can be done of the audiences of Marc Antony, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, or Chief Joseph. These and other assignments bridge the fragmented curriculum and focus skills toward substance.

While some critics may perceive cultural literacy to be at odds with a process-oriented communication course, the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In fact, attention to cultural literacy complements the current emphasis on critical thinking--by providing students with a shared body of information to consider, weigh, and critically address.

NOTES

[1]Max Lerner, Sixteen Ways to a New Lifestyle, Big Sur Recordings, 6970, 1971.

[2]E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[3]Hirsch 18-21, 116.

[4]Hirsch 152-215.

[5]Helene Hanff, The Duchess of Bloomsbury Street (London: Futura, 1973) 138.